

Priam encounters Achilles

U. A. Fanthorpe and Penelope Murray

In the third of our series of Homeric Encounters, the poet, U. A. Fanthorpe, and Classicist, Penelope Murray, respond to the famous scene in the last book of the *Iliad* of reconciliation between the Greek hero, Achilles, and the grieving old man, King Priam of Troy, whose son, Hector, Achilles has slain.

An Old Story by U. A. Fanthorpe

*A matter of timing; it usually is.
The gods see to it; only gods and poets know the trick.*

*The body not decayed at all, despite the days passing,
Despite the ritual trailing round; and the old king
Arriving just when dinner was over, Achilles almost
alone.*

One moment: the king? the body? Achilles?

*Yes. You need to know.
Old Priam, King of Troy;
Hector, eldest and bravest of sons.
These are the Trojans.*

*The Greeks, the invaders –
Achilles, son of the dangerous goddess,
And Patroclus, his true love.
Also various supernumary wives
 gods,
 a rainbow,
 heralds,
 cooks,
 and a daughter (prophetic).*

*Acts find their consequences. Hector kills Patroclus,
Loved by Achilles. Achilles kills Hector,
Eldest and bravest.*

So: two corpses. What happens to them?

*Patroclus the lover, entombed in a high barrow,
The brave, the lordly, with his grave goods etcetera.*

*What used to be Hector is dragged round the barrow
Three times a day, for eleven days, Achilles whooping
And flogging the horses. (You have to remember
He was given to rages, was partly barbarian.)
Bright Hector, killed by Achilles. Dead in the dirt.
Unburied.*

*The timing, clever as gods do it, was just after dinner.
Relaxing time.
Priam comes after dark to plead for the body.
Priam amazed, finds himself kissing
The hands that had murdered his son, hugging
His knees, like a beggar.
 And Achilles?*

Speechless.

*There was Priam, kneeling and kissing, and the old
man's words*

*Struck home. It didn't take much. 'Your father –
Your father will lose his son, as I have mine. Remember
your father.'
And doomed Achilles wept for him,
And for Patroclus too, and for himself, and everything.*

*'I have done a thing that no man on earth has done.
I have kissed the hand of the man who killed my son.'*

*The wine, no doubt; that comfortable after-dinner state
–
These things played their part. It could have been differ-
ent;
The dangerous man, facing the father of dead Hector,
Of bright dead Hector who killed his own true love,
After all he'd sworn to do. Not what he'd planned at all,
Lifting the old king gently, both men weeping now,
Filling the house with grief.*

*Timing is everything. You can't go on for ever
Savaging corpses, seeking vengeance. No need really
For Priam to push it, in the end. The body not decayed
at all
(the gods had seen to that), despite the ritual trailing.
The old king
Arriving just when dinner was over,
Achilles determined already to hand Hector back.*

So that was that, until the next time?

Priam and Achilles by Penelope Murray

The meeting between Priam and Achilles in book 24 of the *Iliad* is one of the most moving scenes in the poem, and indeed in the whole of Western literature. Achilles has not only killed Hector, but defiled and dishonoured his body, dragging it around the tomb of his beloved companion Patroclus, in tribute to his friend who has himself been killed by Hector. Now the aged Priam comes to the Greek camp at night, and, guided by the god Hermes, arrives unseen by the other Achaeans at Achilles' tent to beg back the body from the man who killed his son. Achilles, whose violence and passionate anger is the driving force behind the entire poem, had promised Patroclus that he would give Hector's body 'to the dogs to feed on raw' (23. 21-2). Yet he acquiesces to Priam's plea and returns Hector's corpse to Priam for burial. How are we to believe this scarcely credible scene? As Pope comments, 'it requires all the Art of the Poet to sustain the violent Character of Achilles, and yet at the same time to soften him into Compassion.'

The scene seems entirely natural, and Homer achieves this effect by focusing on the common humanity which binds the two protagonists together, despite their enmity and their differences. The key to the whole encounter lies in the father/son relationship: when Priam enters Achilles' dwelling he goes straight up to Achilles, clasps his knees and kisses the hands that had murdered so many of his sons, and straightaway says 'remember your father'. Peleus 'on the door-sill of sorrowful of age' waits at home in the hope that his only son will one day return home. Whilst he, Priam, has lost all his sons, and the noblest of

them all, Hector, lies slain and unburied.

*Honour then the gods, Achilleus, and take pity upon me
remembering your father, yet I am still more pitiful;
I have gone through what no mortal on earth has gone
through;
I put my lips to the hands of the man who has killed my
children.*

(24. 503-6)

Priam's plea goes straight to Achilles' heart, for what he sees before him is not the king of Troy, his enemy, but a vulnerable old man, an image of own father. And the two sit weeping together, Priam grieving for Hector, Achilles for Patroclus and his own father: what binds them together is the suffering which is the common lot of humanity. But as Achilles says, they cannot go on grieving for ever, for this is life for human beings. We aren't gods, and only the gods are happy. So the contrast at the end of the poem is not between Greeks and Trojans, but between gods and human beings.

This final scene mirrors the opening of the poem where the old priest, Chryses, comes to the Greek camp to plead for the return of his daughter. But Agamemnon turns him away, leading to the quarrel with Achilles and all its disastrous consequences. Here another aged father comes to beg back the body of his child, but this time he is sympathetically treated and there follows the reconciliation and the peaceful resolution of the poem as a whole. But despite the reconciliation there is no happy ending, for Hector's death foreshadows that of Achilles, as Achilles himself knows, and Troy will fall. U.A. Fanthorpe's poem captures brilliantly the essence of the scene, whose moral force depends on each character imagining what it is like to be the other. But she also suggests the fragility of the reconciliation which might dissolve at any moment and the whole cycle of violence begin again.

Penelope Murray teaches at the University of Warwick. She has just edited a collection of papers entitled Music and the Muses: the Culture of mousike in the Classical Athenian City, published by Oxford University Press.